

Just Passing By: Robert Costa

Is there a moral to this story ... Come closer?

I walked past her; she was sitting cross-legged on the footpath, her head bowed downward as if in contemplation. A handwritten sign on a piece of cardboard torn from a carton propped up against the wall. I think I've walked past her dozens of times, never really paying attention or acknowledging her existence. I never read the sign; too small, and the handwriting was too illegible.

The footpath was filthy, her clothes no better, and a small tin to collect what meagre coins she could collect. A half-eaten sandwich lay next to her. Her possessions were wrapped in a grubby blanket. This time, I slowed down, not wanting to stop but somehow needing to.

Not today, maybe tomorrow.

I began to think about how close we all are to being in the same place. Loss of a job, marriage breakdown, domestic violence, health issues...who knows?

It's tomorrow.

She's still there, in filthy clothes, a worn sleeping bag. I tried not to look as I walked past. She stared at me; there was no engagement, her eyes dazed and focused on something past me as if I wasn't there as she gestured towards the small tin.

Not today.

I take the same route every day, passing fancy shops, good eateries, and well-worn paths. I don't think much about it; after all, this is what I'm familiar with. I've never really noticed the chewing gum stuck to the footpath or the overflowing garbage bins used as giant ashtrays in the middle of the city.

She's there again today, same sign, different sandwich, precious little in the tin, same filth. I dropped some money in the tin. Not sure what I was expecting. Maybe thanks or some reaction. Maybe I was hoping to make myself feel a little less guilty. I'm not sure why I was feeling that way. It wasn't that I had anything to do with her situation. Did I have the right to be voyeuristic or judgemental about her life living in squalor and filth? No. I could have left her be. But I didn't want to. Because I wanted to help her. Because I thought that if I could help someone, I could at least try. At least, that's what I thought.

She wasn't there.

I heard she died last night.

But next time I pass by....

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